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SUBJECT: TEA, TIGERS AND TRAFFICKING GO HAND IN HAND IN BENGAL'S CHICKEN'S NECK

REF: KATHMANDU 1719

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11. (U) Summary: Located in a narrow strip of land between Nepal and Bangladesh, the N. Bengal city of Siliguri is a regional economic crossroad. People and goods intersect there, and as India's GDP growth nears ten percent, smaller cities like Siliguri are experiencing rapid expansion. This economic boom, while positive in a broad sense, gives rise to myriad social problems, including trafficking in persons. Combined with the breakdown of traditional structures such as the tea gardens in the area, unemployment, migration and social unrest quickly follow. Tackling these problems in the region requires an international, coordinated approach if it is to be successful. End Summary.

A Cross-Border Economy

12. (U) Because of its location, Siliguri is a transit point for all manner of goods. The Nepal border is only 15 kilometers from Siliguri and Bangladesh is approximately six kilometers to the southeast. Bhutan and China are within a half-day's drive, and Siliguri is the transit point into India's northeastern hinterland, where goods arrive from Burma. In one town west of Siliguri, a small, two-lane bridge connects India to Nepal, and Poloff observed a continuous stream of bicycles, rickshaws, pedestrians, and a few cars passing in between the two countries. Inspection at the border crossing appeared to be random at best. Many items that are legal in Nepal and illegal in India due to import restrictions are easily found in Siliguri. The Hong Kong Market, a narrow maze of alleyways off one of Siliguri's main thoroughfares, offers shoppers an array of cheap goods purportedly made in China and shipped in to Siliguri via Nepal and the Northeast. We observed many of the products such as electronics, DVD players, and kitchen appliances, packaged with labels written in Chinese.

Environment

13. (U) Animesh Bose, an environmental activist, described a flourishing trade in wildlife from India's Northeast states to Bhutan, Nepal, and Tibet via Siliguri. Bose claimed that the towns of Joygaon and Phuntsholing, which straddle the W. Bengal-Bhutan border, are a conduit for wildlife trafficking into Bhutan and Lhasa. According to Bose, Bhutan's royal family are well-known purchasers of rhino and tiger body parts. The

2006 arrest of Ratiram Sharma, one of the largest poachers in the area, in Joygaon had an initial impact in reducing the illegal trade, but the demand is now being filled by other wildlife traffickers. Not all of the wildlife is trafficked out of India. Bose estimated that approximately 10,000 parakeets and hill mynas are captured in the nearby Dooars foothills for sale in Bihar and other states.

¶4. (U) The recent economic growth in N. Bengal also has impacted the elephant population that ranges from N. Bengal to upper Assam. Deforestation, the expansion of the railway system, and a growth in human settlements all have had a direct effect on the migratory patterns of the Indian elephants in this region. Since the beginning of the year, 15 elephants have been killed, either electrocuted by fences put around villages and crops or by trains speeding along the 160km-long track stretching from Siliguri to the Bhutan border cutting through four wild life sanctuaries. Another issue of concern is pollution of rivers and groundwater sources due to dolomite mining in the neighboring hills of Bhutan. Run-off from the dolomite mining areas is affecting the quality of the water in the rivers and dolomite deposits are raising river beds, reducing the rivers' water carrying capacity. Dolomite sediment also causes a change in soil quality, which has an adverse impact on the tea plantations in the Dooars region.

Tea Gardens in Decline

¶5. (U) Historically based on the "tongya" system - a practice implemented by the British of bringing in outsiders to cut down forests, plant tea plants, and settle in the region - N. Bengal's tea gardens are in decline and beset by labor problems, political unrest, and poor management. Ninety percent of the people originally brought in by the British were tribals from Bihar, Jharkhand, and Chhattisgarh. Each family was put into a specific labor line, or tea processing task, and successive generations learned only the specific practice that had been assigned to their family. The first three to four generations

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did not leave the tea garden, thus creating a natural language barrier to integration with Bengalis living outside the tea estates and limiting their future employment prospects.

¶6. (U) In the gardens some forms of gender discrimination continue as well. Women were traditionally only given jobs as pluckers (picking tea leaves) or sorters (sifting through dried tea to remove debris) and had few skills that could be used in different jobs, thereby reducing their prospects for advancement. One tea garden owner told us that there was also a subtle gender inequality in wages, particularly as in overtime pay.

¶7. (U) Poor management is perhaps the most significant obstacle to the future success and re-emergence of the region's tea plantations. Some of the gardens have been purchased by wealthy Indians who prefer to manage from afar, leaving hired managers with little incentive to run the gardens efficiently over the long-term. The result of this decline has been for estate owners to decrease the size of their operations and grow more specialized types of teas. Boutique teas, branded with the "organic" label are likely to become more common, as are tea cultivation methods that label themselves as "environmentally friendly and sustainable."

¶8. (U) For the tea workers, employment in many of the estates has now become seasonal, causing many employees to seek outside income. This makes quick money opportunities like smuggling, trafficking, and prostitution more attractive.

HIV/AIDS and Trafficking in Persons

¶9. (U) On the outskirts of the village of Naxalbari, which sits only four kilometers from the Indo-Nepal border, we spoke with Tamali Dutta, head of the local unit of the Bhoruka Public Welfare Trust (BPWT). BPWT provides assistance to persons with

HIV. Dutta spoke of the impact of economic growth on HIV-related issues. She noted that drug usage had increased rapidly. In addition, increasing numbers of women were migrating to Siliguri and on to Kolkata looking for work. A common arrangement is for women to be hired to carry smuggled goods into Siliguri by truck. The women have sex with the truck drivers in exchange for a reduced cost for the ride into the city.

¶10. (U) Dutta said that because of the awareness campaigns conducted by BPWT and other NGOs at the panchayat (local village) level, they were seeing some improvement in the treatment by the community of persons testing HIV-positive. Where previously the default response had been social ostracization, Dutta found that villagers were more open to understanding the disease and its implications. Access to HIV testing facilities remains poor. There is only one testing center in Siliguri at North Bengal University. Plans for a second testing center are being prepared.

¶11. (U) Poloff asked about Siliguri's expansion and any impact that may be having on trafficking of women. Dutta pointed out the increasing number of dhabas (small rest shelters) along the paved roads. The dhabas are a recent phenomenon, coming up in the past year, she said. Locals do not set up these dhabas; instead they are built by Siliguri traffickers who shuttle girls along the road from Siliguri to Nepal. Women travel back and forth on the roads, providing sex to the drivers and customers at destinations in both India and in Nepal. Dutta added that many traffickers avoid using major roads.

¶12. (U) According to Dutta, police efforts to fight trafficking in Siliguri and in North Bengal are ineffective. Dutta commented that just last year the head of the Bagdogra (just outside of Siliguri) police stated there was "no trafficking problem" in the area. She says that arrests are infrequent and haphazard, some traffickers are granted bail while others are beaten for a few hours and released, and that police are reluctant to charge defendants under ITPA. In Dutta's opinion, the police only needed the NGOs when they had to find a place for a rescued girl to stay. Corroborating this view of the police's ineffectiveness, another NGO called Kanchenjunga Uddhar Kendra led by Rangu Sourya, is now rescuing girls on its own because of police non-responsiveness to the problem.

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¶13. (U) Dutta believes that there are two instances where the number of trafficking cases rises: whenever the government has other problems to deal with, like the rise in unemployment at the tea gardens, and during the wedding season. Prior to the wedding season, men from states such as Punjab and Haryana come to the village in search of brides. Dutta says that despite the growing awareness that some of the women offered marriages will end up in brothels, custom, tradition, and the parents' desire to marry off their daughters override such concerns.

¶14. (U) The problems besetting the tea gardens appear to correlate with the rise in the number of trafficked women in the region. In many tea gardens the work season lasts from March to November. Although the off-season is meant for pruning bushes, turning over soil, and re-planting, the rising costs of these activities along with the overall mismanagement of the tea gardens means that tea workers are effectively laid off from November to March. One estimate put the number of unemployed tea workers at 40-50,000. Journalists have observed increasing migration by former tea garden workers to other parts of West Bengal and India.

¶15. (U) Another concern, identified by both the police and anti-TIP NGOs, is the lack of shelter and rehabilitation homes for rescued women. The nearby district of Cooch Behar has the largest available shelter home with a limited capacity of 50 beds. One in Siliguri has 30 beds. Contacts told us that plans are in the work for a public-private partnership to construct a

new shelter home in Siliguri.

¶16. (U) Comment: When the economic growth is largely unplanned, as in Siliguri, it is not surprising that the community finds itself unready to tackle the social problems that accompany the increased economic activity. In this respect, Siliguri typifies the difficult transition being experienced throughout India in what are described as its "second or third tier cities" as towns grow into new urban centers.. Having no access to any sort of social safety net should an employer shut his business, most workers in the economy of N. Bengal drift toward illicit and undesirable activities in larger urban centers out of economic necessity. Facilitating the problem is the ease by which goods and people can move between Nepal, India, and Bangladesh. Police efforts therefore tend to focus on security issues -- arms and narcotics trafficking and the movement of insurgents in the region. Because of this, it is particularly important that global issues such as trafficking in persons and wildlife, as well as HIV/AIDS be addressed in a multinational context, not simply within a particular state. Contacts we spoke to observed that despite the high numbers of Nepali and Bangladeshi women being trafficked to Siliguri, there is no Indo-Nepal or Indo-Bangladesh body that addresses this cross-border problem. (Note: One contact noted that there is an understanding between the government of Uttar Pradesh and Nepal on anti-TIP cooperation. End note). Nepal recently drafted new trafficking legislation (reftel), but its comprehensiveness in dealing with migrant trafficking from neighboring countries is unclear. In places like Siliguri, these problems truly are international and require a coordinated international response.

JARDINE